focus

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Central America

Central America is generally considered to include the region between Mexico and Colombia, and therefore consists of six independent countries and one colony: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panamá, and British Honduras, claimed by Guatemala but administered by Great Britain. Although Panamá is included here as being within the region, that country does not consider itself a part of Central America, nor do the people of the other five nations consider it as such. These five countries have a common historical tradition, while Panamá's history is quite distinct and reflects its strategic location far more than that of its neighbors. Furthermore, Panamá, even since pre-Conquest times, has been culturally associated with South America rather than with Central America.

The combined population of Central America is about 11 million and its area is roughly that of Utah and Nevada. During the Spanish colonial period, all six countries formed the Captaincy-General of Guatemala which, while officially part of the Viceroyalty of Mexico, was more responsible to the Spanish crown itself than to Mexico City. Upon receiving their independence from Spain in 1821, and after an unsuccessful attempt by Mexico to take over the area, five of the countries joined in forming the Republic of the United Provinces of Central America. This Republic existed until 1839 when, one by one, each country withdrew. Since that time, several attempts have been made to establish a single political unit, but none has succeeded. Panamá, on the other hand, became a part of Gran Colombia until 1903, when it was recognized by the United States as an independent nation.

A MOUNTAINOUS LAND. The greater part of Central America's beautiful and varied landscape is composed of the isthmian highland backbone which extends over 1,000 miles from Mexico to Colombia. Complex folded and faulted ranges, alternating with structural lowlands, form most of the northern highlands, with mineralized crystalline formations exposed locally in eastern Honduras and Nicaragua. Deeply dissected tablelands, many of them 10,000 feet high and separated by plunging canyons, are common in western Guatemala. In Costa Rica, a high range of folded and faulted mountains is the basic feature, and it continues into Panamá almost as far as Panamá City. An east-west gap, today the site of the Panamá Canal, separates this range from the San Blas Mountains,

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which comprise a ridge along the northern coast of eastern Panamá from Colón to Colombia.

The most spectacular scenery is in the chain of volcanic cones stretching down the Pacific side of the highlands from Volcán Tacaná (12,000 feet) in Mexico to Volcán Chiriquí (11,000 feet) in western Panamá. Tectonic instability and earthquakes through the centuries have caused the destruction of numerous cities and several volcanoes are still active. As a result of previous volcanic activity, a deep mantle of ash and lava has accumulated and weathered into a porous and fertile soil. Scattered throughout the highlands are small basins, averaging 3,000 to 5,000 feet in altitude, the best known of which contains the magnificent Lake Atitlán, in Guatemala. The Meseta Central of Costa Rica is another such basin, lying between the main mountain range and four great volcanic cones about 20 miles to the northeast.

With the exception of scattered, narrow coastal plains, there are only three areas of extensive lowlands in Central America. The Nicaraguan depression, considered an alternate route for a transisthmian canal, is a long and narrow structural lowland, extending from the Lempa Valley in El Salvador to the mouth of the San Juán River on the Caribbean Sea, and including the Gulf of Fonseca and Lakes Managua and Nicaragua. In eastern Nicaragua, from Bluefields north well into Honduras, the Atlantic coastal plain widens to become the Miskito Coast. In northern Guatemala, the region known as the Petén includes a flat limestone plain with extensive underground drainage. Small alluvium-filled valleys, such as the Motagua and Ulua of Guatemala and Honduras, are locally significant where the highlands meet the Atlantic Ocean.

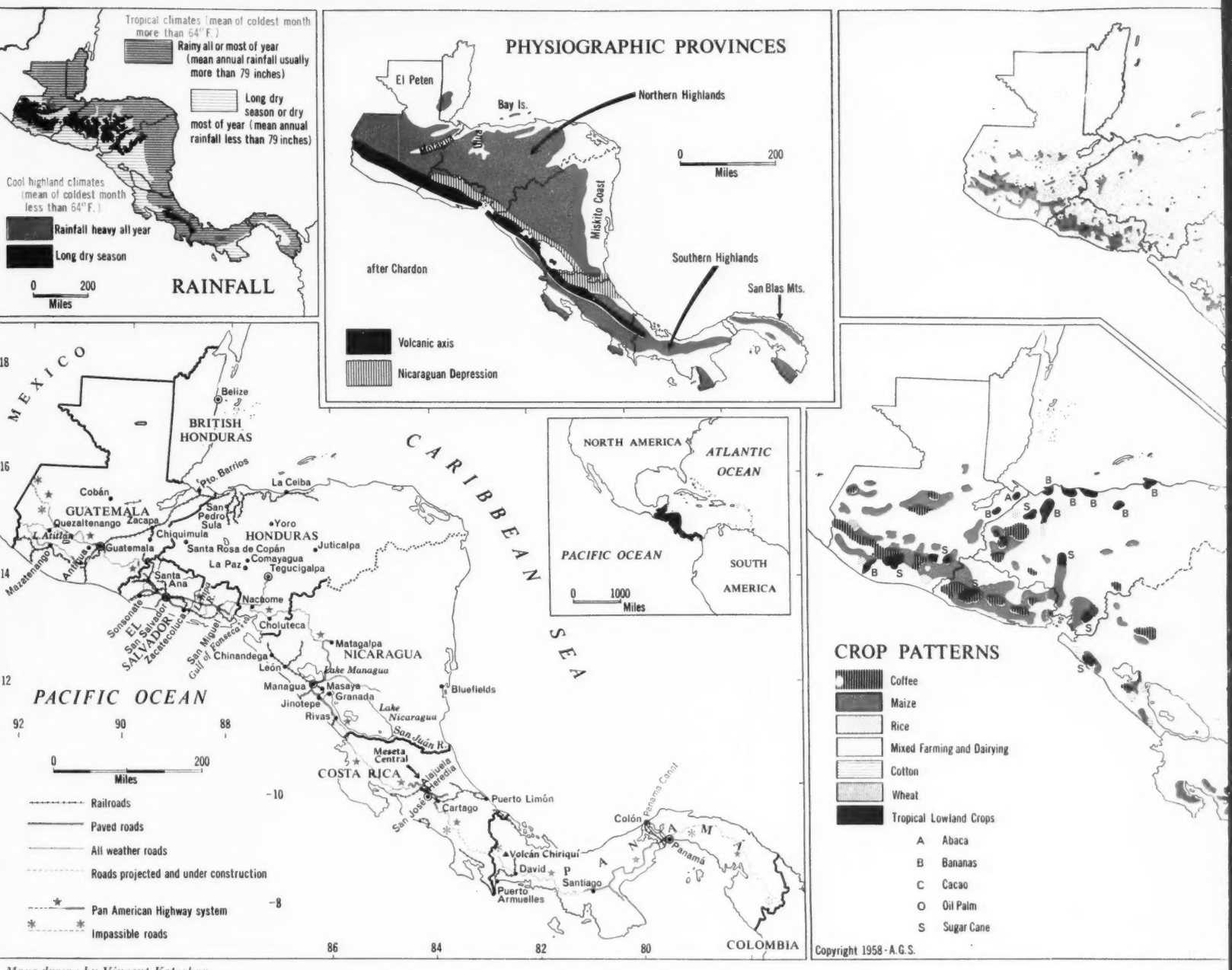
A TROPICAL LAND. Central America is almost completely frost-free; temperatures are mainly determined by altitude and the seasons are generally identified by the amount of rainfall. The Petén, Atlantic coastal plain, most of lowland Costa Rica and Panamá, and the eastern slopes of the mountains in western Guatemala are warm and humid all year. Most of this area is very sparsely populated and covered by dense tropical rainforest interspersed with patches of grassland and pine savannas. Rain falls almost every month, and some areas receive as much as 250 inches a year.

The remainder of Central America is characterized by a marked seasonality of rainfall, with a dry season lasting four to six months, usually from November to April. Average annual precipitation ranges from 35 to 80 inches, depending on such factors as exposure and elevation. In the hot lowland and coastal plains, grasslands or scattered woodlands are widespread. In the cooler northern highlands mixed pine-oak forests are commercially valuable, but pine is not found south of the Nicaraguan depression. In highland Costa Rica and Panamá, cloud forests with oaks dominant are the general rule.

A MIXED PEOPLE. Central America's population is most dense in the northwest and most sparse in the southeast, and most of the settlements are concentrated between 2,000 and 5,000 feet. The western tablelands of Guatemala and the volcanic areas are relatively crowded, particularly in El Salvador, where rural densities are as high as 500 per square mile. With the exception of Managua and Panamá City, highland basins are the sites of the Republics' capitals, which vary in size from Guatemala City's 300,000 persons to 75,000 for Tegucigalpa.

The lowlands along the Atlantic coast are moderately peopled only where plantations have been established; elsewhere they are virtually empty. The Petén, an area of high civilization prior to 900 A.D., is today an empty expanse whose endless forests hide the ruins of Mayan cities. In contrast, the populations of Nicaragua and Panamá, reflecting not physical conditions but the pattern of Indian settlement at the time of the Spanish conquest, are concentrated on their lowland western plains.

Culturally, Central America is a transition zone and has been since pre-Columbian times. In Guatemala, where 54 per cent of the people are pure Indian, the modern population distribution generally follows that of the Mayan Indians in the pre-Conquest period; Quetzaltenango is the major focus. Communities in western Guatemala, isolated from each other by thousand-foot canyons, maintain their individual traditional ways of life despite foreign influences. The rest of Central America is largely mestizo, or mixed Indian and Spanish, with the exception of Costa Rica, which is almost exclusively Spanish. Everywhere, and particularly in Guatemala, the Spanish influence usually has meant not one but two cultures, existing on the same land, and a small number of Spanish descendants who control much of the cultural and economic activity.



Maps drawn by Vincent Kotschar

Along the Atlantic coast, British privateers established bases in colonial times, which led to the rise of several English-speaking communities, such as those of the Bay Islands of Honduras and British Honduras. Much later, the introduction of North American plantations was accompanied by the importation of Negroes, who today form important minorities in eastern Costa Rica and northern Honduras. A similar situation arose in Panamá with the construction of the Canal.

FARMING IS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE. In spite of the fact that only six per cent of the area is under cultivation, the proportion of people who farm varies from just under 55 per cent in Costa Rica and Panamá to about 66 per cent in El Salvador and Nicaragua and more than 80 per cent in Honduras and Guatemala. The role of agriculture is also evidenced by its large contribution to national incomes (about 50 per cent on the average), and by its overwhelming dominance of the export trade.

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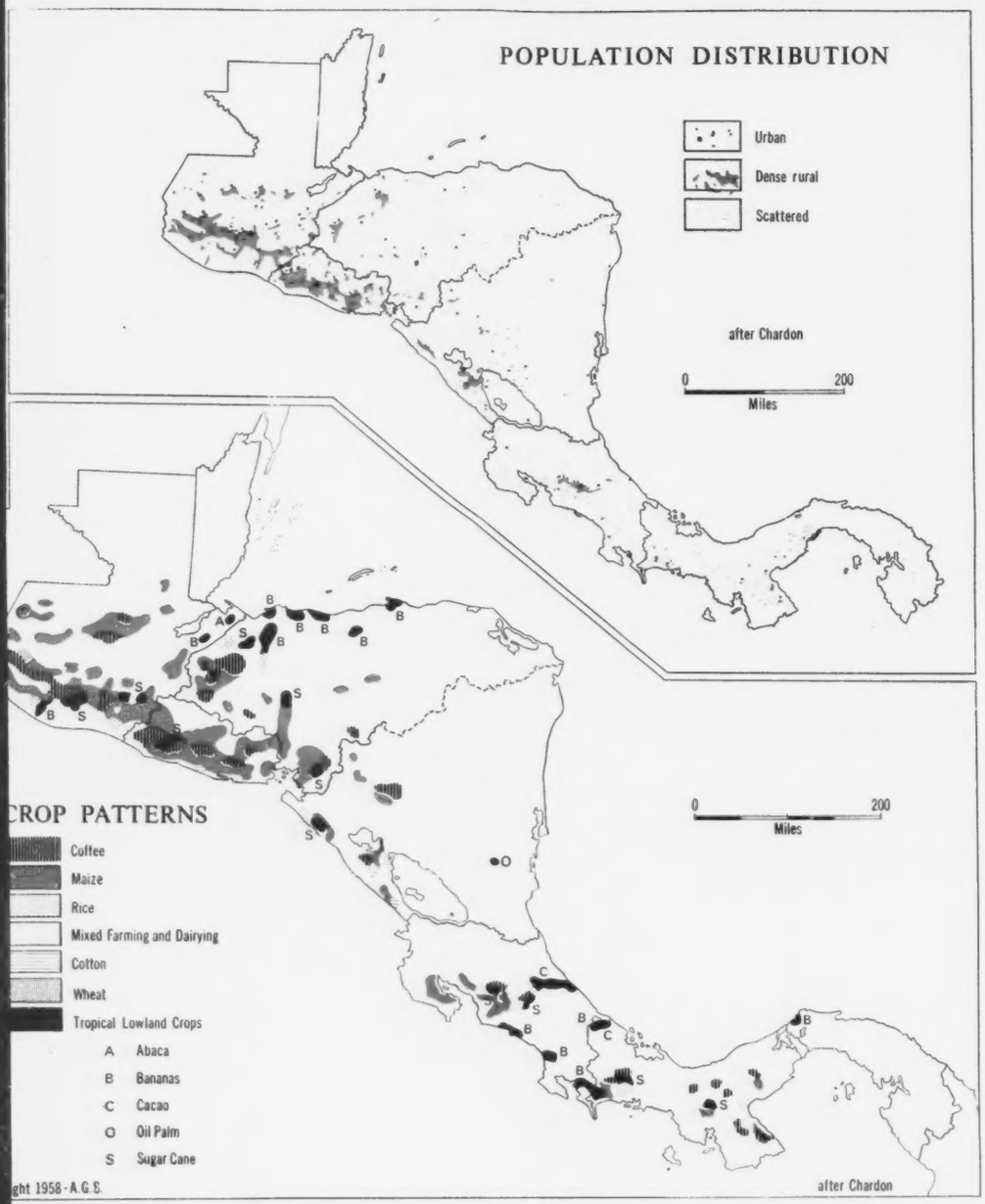

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Coffee, first exported by Costa Rica in 1825, is by far the most valuable commercial crop; Central America's production represents about 10 per cent of that of the world. The coffee is of the "mild" variety and of high quality, and is used mostly for blending. Guatemala and El Salvador are the largest producers, and in the latter coffee often brings in as much as 90 per cent of the export revenue. The coffee tree is usually cultivated by people of Spanish or mestizo descent on both large and small farms, the principal areas of production being on the Pacific slopes of the northern highlands and the Meseta Central of Costa Rica. Volcanic soils and the mild temperatures found between 2,000 and 5,000 feet help to provide optimum conditions for the plant. Great care is given to its cultivation, and yields are consistently high.

Next to coffee, bananas are the most important export product for Central America as a whole and are the leading item for Honduras and Panamá. Cultivation for the foreign market is limited to the lowland coasts, where high year-round temperatures prevail. The United Fruit Company is the largest producer and has extensive plantations in all countries except El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The economic impact of this and other fruit companies on the countries concerned and especially on the lowland areas, cannot be overlooked. Previously untapped and virtually unoccupied tropical regions were developed by building ports, railroads, schools, hospitals, and other facilities. Swamp drainage, flood control, and intensive land utilization represented further large investments. Indeed, the Ulua Valley of Honduras developed to a large extent around the plantations and is now the most active economic area in the country. The advent of the fruit companies was felt politically as well as economically, and their start was often achieved through special

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concessions, including control of schools, hospitals, and police forces. More recently, however, these controls have been transferred to the national governments.

Many of the problems of utilizing the tropical lowlands have not been solved. Diseases, floods, and windstorms destructive to bananas have caused big fluctuations in production and exports. In exceptionally severe cases, diseases have forced major dislocations of the industry, the most notable of which have been the total abandonment of the Atlantic lowlands of Nicaragua and the shift from eastern to western lowlands in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panamá. Some former areas of production have since been devoted to other tropical crops, such as cacao, African oil palm, and abacá. The move to savanna climates, however, necessitated a further investment in costly irrigation and spraying equipment, as well as new transportation facilities.

A crop that has become commercially important recently is cotton, which in 1955 replaced coffee as Nicaragua's first export. Cotton is grown on the Pacific coastal plains, principally in Nicaragua but also in Guatemala and El Salvador, where high yields are common. Modern methods of insect control, intensive use of fertilizer, and increased mechanization have promoted rapid expansion of cotton in areas where flat land, good soils, high temperatures, and a dry season provide favorable growing conditions. Other crops of commercial significance include sugar cane, grown on large farms, sesame, rice, and hard fibers.

The dependency of Central American countries on one or two exports and the resultant vulnerability to fluctuations in prices and national income affects the average farmer very little. Most of the people gain the greater part of their livelihood through subsistence agriculture which, by and large, has changed only slightly since pre-Spanish days.

In all of the Republics except Panamá, maize is the crop which occupies the largest acreages and forms the basis of the economy. Usually, maize is accompanied by beans, sorghums, bananas and plantains, and vegetables. In Guatemala, wheat and rice are grown for urban markets only. Farther south rice occupies a larger place both in the farms and in the diet, and is the leading crop in Panamá. That country is also a variant in that, along with maize, a considerable amount of space is devoted to manioc and yams.

In the Mayan area, which includes Guatemala and part of Honduras, maize is grown on farms averag-

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